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Rebecca Moragn Frank

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Beautiful Songs with Teeth

A Review of Kiki Petrosino's *Hymn for the Black Terrific*

Kiki Petrosino's second collection of poems, *Hymn for the Black Terrific* (Sarabande, 2013), is full of teeth and knives and claws, the incisive and unrelenting language of a furious hymn. This follow-up to her 2009 collection *Fort Red Border* (Sarabande, 2009), which was short-listed for *Foreword's* Book of the Year in poetry, establishes Petrosino's place among the growing number of writers who are effectively carrying on the practice of engaging with history through the musical force of the lyric. A graduate of the University of Virginia, Petrosino uses part of the book to explore her complex relationship to the state and to its national giant, Thomas Jefferson. She is not afraid to make us look head-on into Jefferson's beliefs by using his own language to demonstrate the brutality of living in a state and a nation built on an overtly racist worldview. One can admire the craftsmanship of the built home, she reminds us, without forgiving or forgetting its continual cost. In this collection, the lyricism allows for the violence of language itself, whether in the inherited language of history or the figurative language that helps navigate that history.

The core of the book is the second section, *Mulattress*, a ten-poem sequence headed by a quote from Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*: "Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry." The poems that follow are a skilled and sharp reveal of the ramifications of both Jefferson's words and the history he embodies; Petrosino achieves this by embedding Jefferson's own language in her lyrics. She splinters his despicable claim that "[t]hey secrete less by the kidneys and more by the glands of the skin which gives them a very strong and disagreeable odor" by using the words of the sentence as the end words of the lines in all the poems in this section. Despite this fragmentation, the italics and dramatic end placement emphasize Jefferson's words as a rotting refrain against the clear voice of the speaker.

The speaker of the sequence can be read as a contemporary visitor to Monticello and simultaneously a Sally Hemings figure; this is most clear in the fifth poem of the sequence:

When I walk by the
library, even your chair turns its spine. My fabulous *glands*
weep a little, under the arms. Strange how the cabinet *of the skin*
you hardly registered, until you did. *Which gives*
me such a headwound. When I think of all *them*
crystal tumblers nobody'll ever use again, *a very strong*
loneliness takes me up. You're so sharp & *disagreeable*
to hold. *Je'tadore*.

There's a duality here that calls for us to see the history not just through a backward-looking lens, as Hemings, but through the eyes of the contemporary visitor who knows that the contextually celebrated history we are being guided through—we are in Monticello, the timeless home of Jefferson—renders her as other. Even the chair, emptied by time, still holds the difficult past and makes it present.

Throughout the Mulattress sequence, the speaker responds to the embedded phrase by speaking as poet, as daughter, as lover, as victim of the beliefs inherent in the poem's borrowed words. The opening lines of the poems work to some degree as a repeated refrain of the othered body, progressing in the internalization of forced subjectivity. The third poem begins with the speaker's consciousness of her "colored body": "I didn't know my color till *they* / called me by its dirty name"; this is followed by the fourth poem's address of violation: "A colored body is a wreck *they* / rake with a strobe light." The sixth poem's opening brings home the effects of these violations, as the speaker turns on her own body: "I don't trust this body *they* / wrap like a razor blade in *secret* / crinolines." The speaker responds to the brutality of Jefferson's words and beliefs by shifting the address of "they" to the perpetrators, while naming the consequences to the "they" Jefferson addresses.

The clear-eyed and biting lyrics of the second section come after a gathering of poems thick with vivid and violent language that lives both in the world of attacking allergens in "Allergenesis" and "Ragweed" and in the world of poems like "Ancestors," which builds a sung mythology in its litany of mixed-race ancestors:

There's one climbing up from the deep planks.
You find a glass one. A leather one. A salt one.
You watch one dissolve into the embrace of an oak.
Already there's one drawing a fine grid on your forehead.
There's one disjoining the cables of your wrist.

One lives in horses. Another in a warp of snow.

The poem's imaginative and insistent testimony powers on, building a world of strangely embedded ghosts, reminding us of lost lineages and lost lives. Where else can these ancestors and ghosts live on but in the fragmented details of the poems of their descendants? These are not simply forgotten figures, but embodied figures that possess and consume the speaker. The poem ends in violent imagery that contains a fierce reclaiming of the ancestors:

But you choose the one who blooms like a war by night.
The one pulling another sheaf of your hair into her mouth.
That one is always here. That one, that tender
trench knife in the head.

While the subjects of the poems of the first section vary, the imagery lingers around the head and mouth in the second section, in an obsession around the body that remains, somehow, vocal, from the mediation on the face in "This Woman's Face Is Your Future" to the concluding lines of "Nocturne": "No music / in the world except / what I jaw // & my jaws are black / & fearsome mine." Throughout the first third of the book, there are already numerous tongues, along with screams, kisses, and songs, and the swallowing of needles. It is as if our gaze is to be fixed at the furious mouth of the hymns.

The final section of the collection, *Turn Back Your Head & There Is the Shore*, zooms in on the physical body in a new way, holding on to the language of body and blood, but deepening the imaginative range of the work in a series of prose poems named after Chinese food dishes, real and imagined, such as "Top of a Dumpling, Top of a Temple," "Herd Girl's Favorite Flower," and "Eight Renunciations of the Looking-Glass." The protagonist of these poems, "the eater," is insatiable, almost monstrous in her scope of consumption and embodiment. By the fifth poem, she is an industrial figure, made tender by the obsessive rituals of her consumption:

On market day, she moves like an ocean liner among the cases
of edible silver leaf & grilled seahorses. How the hull of her
chest tips, tenderly, toward the lovely lake of eating sounds.
Her hunger is a metallic swish, is the hook in her clanging
mouth, which she fills now with the flesh of spider crabs
& wild vegetables. *Bell, bell, bell, bell* her lips & teeth repeat,

twenty-seven times before swallowing, & again she takes up
the fried bread, the shredded beef & mooncake.

As with many tropes and repetitions, the echoed figure of “the eater” risks becoming a bit tiresome, like an exercise the poet can’t give up. The repeated prose poem form, the insatiable consumption—while this accumulation may be part of the intent for this section, perhaps a few of the weaker poems could have been cut to maintain the effect without dragging it on.

But a gluttony of prose poems about an eater is perhaps a small price to pay for a book that seizes language and shakes it, making its throatings as visceral and strange as we can bear in one swallow. This is a book that deserves attention, a book that grabs a shared and troubled part of our national history and beautifully makes it the speaker’s own, forcing us to feel the troublesome and cutting personal effects of our shared legacies. Like the ancestor of the poems who is made from that history, so are the poems here. Beauty is made of falseness and fierce ambivalence: “*Je t’adore*,” the speaker in poem five of *Mulattress* declares. For a despicable history still holds the troubled twist of love; the bite of the line is that it is both ironic and true.

What histories do we have to sing of, Petrosino asks us, but our own? And what ways do we have to navigate them but through the telling and through the singing, which will be “terrific” in all of the complexities of that word? The force of the book is captured in the ending of the title poem, “Hymn for the Black Terrific,” which leaves us with these lines:

I’m here for your headful of animal sounds.
You said to draw a diamond in the air & wait.
You lion claw. Come see what I’ve digged
with the teeth of my face.

Petrosino rips into the history and makes beautiful songs with teeth. These poems are ravenous, clawing to respond and be heard, to consume and produce all that language allows them. “See what I’ve digged,” Petrosino’s speaker responds to Jefferson and his worthless claims, “with the teeth of my face.” These are important poems in a growing landscape of literary responses to Jefferson, and Petrosino begins to make her mark as a significant poet with this vital second collection.